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ABSTRACT

Symbolic interactionism, or the interactional perspective, provides the broadest overview of the major theoretical divisions in the field of speech communication. It is neither too abstract nor overly concrete and is directly linked to communicative behavior, and thus does not impose an inappropriate mechanism on the discipline in order to create a quality of sophistication and maturity at the expense of potentially rich avenues of exploration. A new taxonomy for speech communication should include a set of symbolic interactions ranging along a conceptual continuum from impersonalness (those interactions affected by role assignment) to interpersonalness (those interactions dependent on the psychological characteristics of the interactants). The major concern with regard to this approach should be the operationalization of those symbolic variables that will best describe crucial points on the continuum. (KEH)

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THEORETICAL PRACTICALITY: A Functional Taxonomy of Speech Communication

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The field of communication appears to have been run over roughshod by "those who ask, what is it all about?...those who need to ask,...those who need points sharply made" (Ellison, 1965, p. 373). In demanding the construction of theories, or the application of theories to communication, scholars are like the parents of a gifted child who send applications to Harvard out with the diaper service; a bit overeager. It would seem more appropriate to allow theory to develop "through a social process in which broad numbers of researchers are won to a particular perspective because of its perceived fruitfulness as a way of asking and answering questions." (Delia, 1977, p. 61) Communication as a discipline is not sufficiently mature to place the theoretical demands and constraints upon it that older, more sophisticated sciences are capable of supporting. Rather than imposing a borrowed theory upon communication, a perspective which encourages the type of "description and interpretation of the communicative activity our theories are supposed to explain," (Hawes, 1977, p. 64) would be a more fruitful and productive approach.

There is a perspective which supplies exactly the needed description and interpretation. Symbolic interactionism or the interactional perspective provides the "broadest overview" (Littlejohn, 1983, p. 45) of the major theoretical divisions in the field. It is the perspective "under which numerous specific theories may fall" (Littlejohn, 1983, p.45). Emphasizing the examination of the "action and symbolic action in a processual development of human communication," (Fisher, 1978, p. 192) symbolic interactionism describes and delineates communication as a social process, stemming from an internal development of the mind and self as reflexive entities with distinctive properties. Approaching communication in this manner performs exactly the functions demanded earlier. There is no attempt to impose a begged, borrowed or stolen mechanism on the act of communication, but rather a description of

the communicative process which can demonstrate or create a theory for itself should one prove to be beneficial or necessary.

The primary benefits of symbolic interactionism can be demonstrated by examining the limitations of the other major theoretical divisions of the discipline, beginning with the covering-law theory. Borrowed heavily from the naturalistic sciences and physics, it is evident that covering-law theory possesses two major problems, foremost of which is simply that "the covering law perspective contributes absolutely nothing to our understanding of communication" (Delia, 1977, p. 46). Covering law merely gives directions for the development of statements about communication and its functions. By failing to continue the progression and make those statements, law leaves the communication scholar with nothing but a cookbook. It is the abstract nature of this cookbook approach which leads to the other problem of covering law. The level of abstraction creates difficulties with the utilization of the recipes from the cookbook; in attempting to follow the directions, the communication scholar finds himself unable to locate the ingredients. The failure to discover regularities of occurrence which would tend to indicate law or lawlike applications is distinctively discouraging. "Multitudes of human beings, including social scientists and scholars, obviously disagree as to their understanding, explanation, and even definition of human communication" (Fisher, 1978, p.50). These differences preclude the discovery of regularities necessary to the formalization of covering laws. Symbolic interactionism does not demand such discovery of regularities, but permits and even emphasizes the individual interpetation of communication events. Interactionism also avoids the primary problem of law; it is directly and concretely interwoven with the process of human communication from internalization to societal interaction, and thereby naturally contributes to our understanding of communicative phenomena.

In examining the rules theory of communication, problems similar in type if not in definition are seen to occur. The specificity of rules theory, in the prescriptive nature of its application, settles for mere description ("what") and explanation ("how") of human communication behavior and ignores interpretation ("why"). However, should an attempt to extend rules theory beyond description be made (as in Cushman, 1977), "sight is lost of the ordinary understanding of rule-explanations of social interactions" (Delia, 1977, p. 58). The viability of rules is dependent upon an interpretative perspective which provides the missing "why" (Delia, 1977, p. 59). Symbolic interactionism, focussing on the interpretation of symbolic human interaction, provides the perspective needed to describe and explain communicative behavior. Additionally, the interactive perspective as both "precursor and ...product of shared meaning" (Littlejohn, 1978, p. 72) provides a means of answering the "why" questions through new directions in research.

Finally, in looking at systems theory, the substantive value of symbolic interactionism becomes evident. Systems theory in its essence, provides little more than a framework for examination of communicative phenomena. "Systems theory...gives us a ...way of conceptualizing but provides little basis for knowing why things occur as they do" (Littlejohn, 1978, p. 42). Additionally, systems theory all but eliminates the impact of the individual on communication behavior. "When the focus of the analysis is from the level of the system, individuals serve to constrain the system...internalized attitude simply cannot affect the sequence of interpersonal behaviors" (Fisher, 1978, p. 212). This is directly conflictive with the view from symbolic interactionism. "The human does not merely exist...but acts toward environmental phenomena creatively and reflexively" (Fisher, 1978, p. 168). In eliminating the individual's internalized functions (the creation of meaning and the "generalized other") from

consideration, systems theory effectively eliminates meaning from communication; and yet without meaning communication can hardly be said to occur. "The correlation of signs with their meanings by a selective mental process; the correlation of symbols with concepts and concepts with things...are, essentially, the relationships used in weaving the intricate web of meaning which is the real fabric of human life" (Langer, 1942, pp. 77-78).

In its essentials, symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective serves the multifarious purposes of communication scholars exceptionally well. While providing a perspective from which to examine communication, symbolic interactionism avoids the major faults of alternative theories. Interactionism is neither too abstract nor overly concrete. It is directly linked to communicative behavior, and thus is not guilty of imposing an inappropriate mechanism on the discipline in order to create a quality of sophistication and maturity at the expense of potentially rich avenues of exploration. It is able to assist scholars on answering questions of "what" and "how" and provides guidelines for research to answer "why". Symbolic interactionism, in its essentials, is the sole communication perspective which is not a begged, borrowed or stolen mechanism; it is a valuable point from which to view and explore the myriad aspects of the discipline.

In an attempt to understand any phenomenon an investigator must choose the means by which the phenomenon of concern will be observed. The choices made by the investigator will have an influence on that which will be gathered from scientific observations. In the case of speech communication, the way an investigator chooses to view the phenomenon or the way in which the phenomenon is subdivided will have a powerful effect on the data collected. Because of this epistemological concern, it appears relevant to review the current state of theory building in speech communication.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: first, an examination of speech communication from a functional standpoint is presented; second, the previously acceptd subdivisions within the area of speech communication are reviewed; and third, an alternative taxonomy for the study of speech communication is advanced and supported.

In order to embark on an examination of a phenomenon, one must know what it is that is being examined. There is a perspective which will supply this needed clarification. Symbolic interactionism or the interactional perspective provides the "broadest overview" (Littlejohn, 1983, p. 45) of the major theoretical divisions in the field. It is the perspective "under which numerous specific theories may fall." (Littlejohn, 1983, p.45) Emphasizing the examination of the "action and symbolic action in a processual development of human communication," (Fisher, 1978, p. 192) symbolic interactionism describes and delineates communication as a social process, stemming from an internal development of the mind and self as reflexive entities with distinctive properties. Approaching communication in this manner performs exactly the functions demanded earlier. There is no attempt to impose a begged, borrowed or stolen mechanism on the act of communication, but rather a description of the communicative process which can demonstrate or create a theory for itself should one prove to be beneficial or necessary.

According to Lewis, Cummings & Long (1977) speech communication has four functions: 1) representing and/or sharing ideas, 2) seeking solutions to problems, 3) resolving conflicts and 4) changing behavior. Symbolls are functions or tools both intrinsic and extrinsic of the above mentioned. Because of this, communication may be best understood from a "functional perspective to the symbolic exchange between people" (Lewis, et al. 1977, p. 2).

The main focus of this paper is the message. The message, or symbolic exchange, should be influential in subdividing the discipline. However, the major means for dividing the field of speech communication into manageable chunks, suitable for instruction and/or investigation, has been the environment or the situation. A quick survey of the most commonly used texts for the basic course will illustrate the main areas of interest to be intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, public, orgainizational and mass communication. In appraisal of this taxonomy, Miller (1977) comments:

> The distinctions stressed in the situational approach stack the deck in favor of confusion and banality rather than clarity and scientific utility (p. 165-166).

In furthering this stance, Miller believes we as a discipline ask the wrong questions. The investigative or conceptual concern is not how the situation affects the transaction but rather how the total number of communicators affect the labeling of the transaction. These types of considerations appear to be leading the field nowhere.

What happens in a dyad that does not happen in a small group or an organization? This question may initially appear trite, but after some consideration the impact should be apparent. The number of interactants is not the most important aspect of speech communication. Reinforcing my initial position, symbolic interaction or the message is the central variable. For example, an investigator should not interpret an interaction in this fashion: A dogmatic individual is a communicator who generates biased, black and white messages. Rather, the investigator should view the situation in this manner: The generation and transmission of biased, black and white messages are indicators

of dogmatic behavior. This is not simply a question of semantics. Examining the message and generalizing to the interactant's personality characteristics is a more valid method of interpretation. Employment of this method would also permit a contextual sensitivity not possible when analyzing the same interaction from the alternative perspective. If an investigator generalizes from the symbolic interaction to the traits, the salience of the issue, the speaker's involvement, and his role in the interaction may be ascertained. This could result in viewing the assumed traits as situationally induced states and not permanent personality characteristics.

The method of dividing the field of speech communication via situation or environment is not the optimum path to arrive at a taxonomy of speech communication. It is as possible to have self-disclosure in a small group as in a dyad; it is also possible to have a leader in a dyad as well as in a small group. If one accepts the symbolic interaction perspective, it is difficult to find a communication variable that could not be investigated in all situation levels. Therefore, an alternative method of interdisciplinary division is needed. A taxonomy which is an outgrowth of Cummings (1977), Miller (1977) and Role theory is proposed.

In the proposal of a new taxonomy for speech communication, the first level to be considered will be "impersonal communication" (Peters, 1974). Impersonal comunication refers to an individual communicatively relating to another individual based on their respective social roles. Relating to social role means that message response predictions are based on sociological and cultural information rather than psychological information. The interactants assign one another roles. Cummings categorizes this process of assigning roles as

organizationness. This behavior is typical in interactions characterized by high levels of uncertainty and/or high level of structure (first encounters, formal meetings, and possible conflict situations).

Impersonal communication or impersonalness is not restrictd to any one situational level; it occurs at any situational level and in varying degrees. Because of this variability, impersonalness is not a concept that can be measured based on presence or absence. Impersonalness is an endpoint on a conceptual continuum, the opposite end being interpersonal communication or interpersonalness.

Interpersonalness is characterized by communication that uses psychological information as a bases for prediction rather than using social or cultural considerations. Interpersonalness is similar to what Cummings describes as groupness. However, Cummings' term "groupness" may suggest unintentional association with one specific situational level, the small group. This association is not justified, but because of its possible association with one level, we chose not to adopt Cummings' terms. Rather than groupness and organizationness, we have selected the terms impersonal and interpersonal.

Interpersonalness can occur on the small group or organizational level as well as the dyadic level. Impersonalness may occur between intimate friends as well as total strangers. This way of looking at speech communication shifts the attention from size of interaction to the quality of symbolic exchange between and among the interactants. This distinction may be evidenced in the use of restricted versus elaborated code systems. As the coding system between interactants becomes more restricted, the interactants may be analyzed as more interpersonal and thereby more intimate.

Cummings suggests considering roles as an additional important aspect when examining such a continuum. For example, if in examining the roles of sender and receiver, the roles are found to be evenly distributed, or each interactant is observed occupying the role of sender as often as every other member (i.e., no one member or set of people is controlling the interaction), the interaction is said to be an example of groupness or interpersonalness. The degree to which the role occupancy of either role (sender/receiver) changes is a reflection of role assignment: leadership, power...etc. When this takes place, the interaction begins to move down the continuum in the direction of impersonalness.

In summary, speech communication should be viewed from a functional standpoint in the light of symbolic interaction. The main focus of investigative and instructional attention should not be situational or environmental divisions. Speech Communication should be a set of symbolic interactions ranging along a conceptual continuum from impersonalness (those interactions affected by role assignment) to interpersonalness (those interactions dependent on the psychological characteristics of the interactants). The major concern with regards to this approach should be the operationalization of those symbolic variables that will best describe crucial points on the continuum.

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